

In an interview with Gerald O'Grady (springer in 3, 2000), we discussed the media studies course that Prof. O'Grady started at the State University of New York at Buffalo (SUNYAB). Significant though it is, this place for the discourse of media and art is historically so unique that we thought it could be important to examine media art education in more usual schools in the United States as well.

Barbara Lattanzi received her M.A. in Media Studies at SUNYAB after having completed undergraduate studies in art at the Art Institute of Chicago. Since then she has taught at SUNYAB, the University of Wisconsin, the State University College in Buffalo, Syracuse University, New York, and Alfred University, New York, and will be taking up a position as Visiting Artist in the digital media faculty at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Although, fundamentally, she has taught about media awareness in art throughout her career, her artistic fields of activity include art, film making, photography, art history, video production, media art, media analysis, digital arts, and electronic art. The departments in which she has taught are as colorful as her courses: art, film, art media, communications department, etc.. This already tells us how and where media art studies are usually handled in American schools.

Besides her pedagogic activities, Lattanzi is a media artist, designs her own experimental software programs, is a practitioner of public-access TV, and researches artistic activities that use the media of video, computer and internet. Her works include video works («The Machine,» 1990 – also a multi-media installation ; «Attentat,» 1996, and «Emma and Ben's Secret Language,» 1995), a collection of interactive works («WildernessPuppets,» 1998~ ), and a software engine for computer-based performance using moving images («Muscle and Blood Piano,» 2000~).

Sei: You have taught at various schools, mostly around the Great Lakes. So I'd like to ask you something we always wanted to know but were afraid to ask.... about the teaching of media art in the United States; I don't mean [Carnegie] Mellon or MIT, but the majority of colleges in mid-America. We somehow have the idea that every American school teaches computer and internet skills, that students are being instructed how to be feministically and ethnically aware on the Net, and so on. But maybe the reality is different. What is normal practice like in these schools?

Lattanzi: The resource-intensive nature of technology-based, media art studies requires that art departments forge strange alliances. Usually this means constructing a relationship with Computer Sciences and Engineering in order to share resources. A university in Pennsylvania creating a computer-mediated art program, for example, was recently integrated with the Business School of that same school.

In my experience, there are three main reference ideas for characterizing computer and media art studies: research, entrepreneurial cultural studies, and the dominance of graphic design studies. First is the notion of academic »Research«. The term »research« is one which seems to be repeated more often than, say, »video art« in technology-based art studies. It becomes a strategic buzz-word in the situation of post-cold-war competition for resources and funding. But »research« also connotes an insular practice that is socially or politically detached.

Second, there are examples of media art teaching methodologies that use Cultural Studies as a

basis for entrepreneurial ventures built inside of the academic »incubator.« I have heard of a university course in a media-study department where students participate in the team-based production of a saleable computer game that »empowers« young girls in the study of math.

Third, there is the history of »desktop publishing,« which emerged with the Apple desktop computer in the 1980s. Does this history explain the other phenomenon which I have observed: art departments whose approaches to media art studies have been dominated by graphic design studies? Art faculties who adopted the computer as a tool for graphic design and »expanded« printmaking became the same faculties that began teaching time-based media production (video and sound design) from the same tool-based orientation. Technology, for these early adopters, is a set of tools to be mastered – not a set of social relations to be engaged, nor a range of historically-specific cultural practices to be explored.

Sei: That explains to me more about your works. Your media works, such as »Wilderness Puppets« and »Muscle and Blood Piano,« look like the result of your response to, or criticism of, the problem of media art studies in the States. Let us take, for example, the fact that you develop your own software program, not for the purpose of selling it, but solely for artistic reasons, when art is the kind of arena where corporations would get lost and not be able to find any practical use for any of the elements in there for their commercial activities. And your programs, because of the subject matter and the way they are designed, motivate other women to empower themselves with their own software ...but are again developed for no other purpose than art. Do you do it consciously?

Lattanzi: Current preoccupations of technologically-innovative media production leave me in the dust. And I am happy to be in the dust, where I can be isolated and free to ask »obvious« questions. I would rather make my own software (what I term »idiomorphic software«[\[1\]](#)), because the commercial software that I use comes at a price. That price has less to do with money and more to do with a different process of abstraction: the active framing of my work within considerations dictated by irrelevant practices of Design.

I make clear with students that I am not interested in their Design »clarity« and »precision«, but in their discovering productive ambiguities. This is much harder. For example, in response to what engineers say: »If you can imagine it, then we can engineer it,« I think that »If you can engineer whatever is imaginable, then wake me up when it's over because this imagination needs a new paradigm.« The students are learning to make space for ambiguities, mistakes, clumsiness, lucky accidents and do-it-yourself aesthetics...only then is a technology (as a cultural production) truly matured.

I hope other women would see something in my work that offered not only an intellectual challenge and affective engagement that spoke to shared experience... historically gender-specific ways that we desire, experience loss, etc., but also a bridge to something strange and radically different, where women's engagement with the process of media production perhaps begins with a sense of recognition, but then opens out into something else.

The nearest approximation to »something else« would be analogous to the sensation of thinking the thoughts of another living species, at the same time as knowing that you could BECOME that

other species just by thinking those thoughts. Sometimes, when I am struggling to formulate code, or to set up data-transmissions among several abstract code-objects that I have produced in the guts of my computer, I have that sensation.

Sei: Once you talked about Craig Baldwin's film »Spectres of the Spectrum,« which is about the excessive performances of the performers in early television, and thus looks behind the mediated reality. Assuming that this is the case in any medium when the medium is not mature enough, do you find excessive performances born of necessity at this stage in the Net's development?

Lattanzi: The quality of an electronic transmission exceeding or spilling out of its representational frame undermines the (ideological) authority of that frame.

Craig Baldwin valorizes the moments of early television where such »excess« occurs: the real-time, »live« electronic transmissions that risk the uncontrollable performance. That technological necessity (before the use of videotape), becomes a cultural and aesthetic value, how legends are born.

Ironically, Baldwin does not take that same risk (of the real-time, »live« video transmission). He is a historian of media, our very own Thucydides. Where other »cultural studies« approaches deconstruct media and analyse the power relations embedded within the technology, Baldwin's chronicles instead transform the conditions of electronic media (its everyday, contingent, situational aspects) into Legend. I would define »legends« as culturally-renewing, generative stories.

Are there legends of cultural production of the Internet (or other forms of interactive electronic media)? Are there examples of work that spill out of the signifying constraints of the technology either intentionally, or despite themselves and BECAUSE of contradictory limitations of the technology?

I look to those whose ideas about the socially connective aspects of media border on obsession and »failure«. I use the term failure to apply to works which APPEAR to be superseded by commercial approaches or products. For example, there is the »Alien Staff«[\[2\]](#) by Krzysztof Wodiczko. It is a communications project, a 'social sculpture' that appears to be outmoded and superseded by hybrid electronic telecommunications devices such as the cell phone/Personal Digital Assistants (PDA). The brilliance of this piece is the way it turns the idea of »media« inside-out. The immigrants, whose exploited physical labors might define (for those in power) their »social value«, instead become participants in the »building and construction« of social space. As Wodiczko has described, in the encounter between stranger and immigrant, it is the immigrant who becomes the »media«. The immigrant stands, physically and culturally, between the stranger and the immigrant's own self-representation (the staff). It is that physical, real-time, mediation which constructs the social connection. The Alien Staff is a electronic media prop in a performance of cultural encounter and exchange. The Staff is pointed to, waved at, engaged as a representation. But it is the coming together of multiple strangers that is being made possible. Unlike the databasing of personal information in the consumer PDA, this form of self-representation is meant to be deployed as a public act.

Sei: That brings up the question of creating »art forums« – in true sense of the word – in the

public space that has emerged with new media technology. You talked about the »Alien Staff« that physically helps media turn inside-out, but does this happen in Net space as often as it should? My impression is that the current form of Net forum helps create a few »Net artists« that are comparable with early avant-garde artists, as Vuk Cosic mentioned in one interview,<sup>[3]</sup> instead of creating an art forum for everybody. Do you think Net forums such as Nettime or the Thing reflect the voices of Net users enough?

Lattanzi: The problem lies with the idea that »Net Art« must be connected to the Internet. Isn't this a mistake: conceiving any art form as subordinate to a given technology? Sculptors who work with bronze need a much broader definition of sculpture than the particular medium of bronze and its specific technological processes.

We put the cart before the horse when we put our main energy into the following story: Cultural Studies, as an academic »industry«, (1) needs to create a profitable market of scholarly exchange based upon scarcity (i.e., a few »Net Art stars«) and (2) uses forums like Nettime to reproduce that basis of exchange.

What is the paradigm that is going to enable new versions of Net Art histories and enable the identification of significant work being done right now, at the margins of the current discussion? Net Art is a new art form that does not depend for its existence on the Internet. If the Internet was to be ended tomorrow, there would still be Net Art!

If Net Art does not depend on the Internet, are there other practices and models to begin a redefinition? There are many examples, I think. Here are several:

- (1) cultural diasporas, which predate the cross-border communicative practices of the Internet;
- (2) political protests (such as those against the World Trade Organization) which use the Internet, but whose participants have learned from their individual experience of the Internet how to shape and implement non-hierarchical, decentralized strategies of engagement whether online or off;
- (3) Net Art productions which do not exist on the Internet, but which transcode features of the Internet into a physicalized performance (such as Simon Pope's »Ice Cream For Everyone,« which performs recipes as algorithms for specific social occasions, and »Alien Staff«);
- (4) contemporary music scenes which co-exist with electronic forms of international distribution but which are fundamentally tied to the »live«, in-person performance. It is this physical, »non-abstract« dimension, as it exists in tension with the sound artist's broader distribution, which emphasizes cultural encounter and exchange as the music's (and the Internet's) primary non-technical value.

1 An »idiomorph« is something characterized as having a unique form. »Idiomorphic software« runs counter to current development of software-as-tools which emphasize industrial efficiency or generic functionality over a particular, constructed relationship to the user/viewer. The software conceives of the interface as a mediation that is inherently specific rather than generic. Software applications and applets can produce forms of engagement that are explicit about the authorship and intentionality that is always there »behind« the software, and forms of interactivity that are willing to narrativise the subsequent interplay with the »agency« of the user.

2 A project in which immigrants tell their personal histories to strangers whom they encounter in public locations. These immigrants hold a tall Staff that has »relic« containers for display of personal memory artifacts. The Staff also has a monitor mounted at the top (the newer version includes a cellular phone antenna), on which is displayed a video of the immigrant telling his/her own story. <<http://www.media.mit.edu/~jrs/krz/alien.html>>

3 [www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199810/msg00083.htm](http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199810/msg00083.htm)